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SACRED COW

an idea or thing that cannot be altered

1. Don't suggest that the boss should get rid of one of his secretaries so that we might hire another clerk. The subject of his secretaries is a *sacred cow*.
2. Even though the country needed to raise more money to pay for military and social programs, the president refused to raise taxes. To him "no new taxes" was a *sacred cow* that he was unwilling to sacrifice.

The expression originates from the Hindu belief that cows are sacred and cannot be killed or eaten. The expression is frequently used to describe an idea or thing that ought to be changed or altered but cannot be because the authority forbids it.

SALES PITCH

a speech or presentation designed to persuade someone to buy or do something

1. I hate door-to-door salespeople. They interrupt whatever you are doing and keep you standing at the door with their *sales pitch* about how good their product is.
2. No one knew how Ken had managed to persuade the boss to give him a bigger office, but they all agreed he must have had a very good *sales pitch*.

Compare to: *(give someone a) snow job; (give someone a) song and dance*

The expression is usually used to describe a sales situation (sentence 1), but it can also be used metaphorically (sentence 2).

SALT OF THE EARTH, THE

a very dependable and unpretentious person

1. You can count on Ruth to be there when you need her. She's *the salt of the earth*.
2. Greg may not be a very exciting person, but he'll never let you down or disappoint you. He's *the salt of the earth*.

SALT (SOMETHING) AWAY

to save, store, or hoard something (usually something highly valued and in danger of being stolen)

1. I don't know what Ann does with all the money she earns, but I know she doesn't spend it on herself. She must be *salting it away* for her retirement.

2. Sometimes we give food to the old man next door, because we know that he doesn't have much money. Whenever we do, we try to give him enough so that he can *salt some of it away* for another day.

Compare to: *on ice; save (something) for a rainy day*

The expression originates from the practice of using salt to preserve food before storing it.

SAVE/LOSE FACE

to maintain/not maintain a degree of pride in a shameful situation

1. The father *lost face* when his son was expelled from school. It was a poor reflection on the man's ability to influence and control his family.
2. I knew that what I had done was wrong, but when I was discovered, I pretended that I hadn't known it was wrong. That way I was able to *save face*.

Originally *lose face* was the direct translation of the Chinese saying 'tiu lien.'

SAVE (SOMETHING) FOR A RAINY DAY

to save something, usually money, for a possible future need

1. Rob saves a portion of every paycheck in the bank. He's not saving for anything in particular, but one never knows when one might need some extra money all of a sudden. He's *saving for a rainy day*.
2. My mother always made me save some of my money in case I needed some unexpectedly. She made me *save for a rainy day*.

Compare to: *salt (something) away; on ice*

The expression suggests that a rainy day is one when a person will not be able to earn any money, and so he or she needs to prepare for such a day by setting aside some money now.

SAY A MOUTHFUL

to say something of a significant or shocking nature (sentence 1); to say more than one should (sentence 2)

1. John pushed his way in to the party and confronted Laura. He began to rant and rave and say things everyone knew he would later regret. He *said a mouthful*.
2. Everybody managed to keep the surprise party a secret until the last minute, when Jennifer's younger sister gave it away. She *said a mouthful* before she remembered that the party was supposed to be a secret.

Compare to: *go off half-cocked*

The expression is usually used to describe when someone says a lot, not so much in terms of the number of words as in the significance of the words.

SCARED OUT OF (ONE'S) WITS

so afraid that one is unable to think clearly

1. You shouldn't jump out of the shadows like that! You *scared me out of my wits*!
2. Michelle's brother played a prank on her, but she didn't think it was funny. She was *scared out of her wits*.

This expression is usually used as an exaggeration to mean "very frightened for a short time."

SCREW LOOSE/LOOSE SCREW, HAVE A

to be harmlessly crazy

1. Sometimes Mr. Simpson talks to himself, and sometimes he imagines that he sees creatures from outer space. I think he *has a screw loose*.
2. The old lady on the bench will tell you the story of her life if you give her a chance. I imagine she's just lonely or she *has a loose screw* somewhere.

Compare to: *bats in (one's) belfry; out to lunch; off (one's) rocker*

SECOND-GUESS

to dispute or try to understand someone's reason for doing something

1. No one knows for sure why the boss quit so abruptly, but we are all trying to *second-guess* his reasons.
2. Peggy came to work and simply announced that she was leaving her husband. She offered no explanation and told everyone who asked that it was none of their business. She told everyone not to *second-guess* why she left her husband.

SECOND-RATE

of inferior quality; not the best

1. This hotel isn't the best. It's really a *second-rate* place.
2. When they remodeled their kitchen, they bought all new appliances of the best quality. They wanted nothing that was *second-rate*.

Synonyms: *third-rate; fourth-rate*

Antonym: *first-rate*

Expressions using *rate* generally go only as far as *fourth-rate*. *Second-, third-, and fourth-rate* are synonymous. There are no degrees of inferiority. They are all opposites of *first-rate*.

SECOND THOUGHTS, HAVE

to begin to have doubts; to question and re-examine a decision

1. After you have decided to get married, it's not unusual to have *second thoughts* and wonder whether you are really ready for such a big step.
2. I know we've already made the commitment to buy that house, but now I'm having *second thoughts* about it. Are you sure it was a wise decision?

Compare to: *cold feet*

Whereas *get cold feet* means to change one's mind because of doubts, *have second thoughts* means only to begin to have doubts. One may or may not change one's mind based on *second thoughts*.

SEE EYE TO EYE

to agree

1. It's relatively unusual for teenagers and their parents to *see eye to eye* on some issues like driving privileges, dating, and the importance of school.
2. The two firms broke off their partnership because they no longer *saw eye to eye* on how much money to invest in new research and development.

SEE RED

to get angry

1. John *saw red* when his boss tried to make everyone in the office believe that John had made the mistake.
2. My father *sees red* when I come home late.

Compare to: *fly off the handle; blow (one's) stack; lose (one's) temper*

The expression probably originates from the idea that a bull is supposed to become enraged when it sees the bullfighter's red cape.

SEE (SOMETHING) THROUGH

to finish something one has started

1. The boy had said he would do the job, but it was more work than he had expected. However, he decided to *see the job through* because it was the right thing to do.
2. It wasn't a pleasant task, but Jane knew she had to finish it. She *saw it through* to the end.

Compare to: *see through (something/someone)*

SEE THE LIGHT

to understand something clearly

1. Wendy was completely fooled by the young man. We all wondered when she would *see the light*.
2. They finally *saw the light* when we explained the situation to them.

Compare to: *dawn on (someone)*

Dawn on someone means to understand something some time after it should have become apparent, whereas *see the light* simply means to understand.

SEE THROUGH (SOMETHING/SOMEONE)

to not be fooled by a false front or disguise that someone presents in order to mislead; to understand the true nature of someone or something

1. The little boy told his mother that he was not the one who had taken the candy, but his mother *saw through his story* because she could see chocolate on his face.

2. The pair had everyone convinced they were a luckless but well-intentioned couple. Very few people could *see through them*, and many gave them money, food, and clothing.

Compare to: *see (something) through*

SEE WHICH WAY THE WIND BLOWS

to determine what stance to take based on what others want, even though such actions or words may not be what one sincerely wants to do or say

1. Many politicians try to say what they think their constituents want to hear, even though they don't always mean it. The politicians look to *see which way the wind blows* before they speak.
2. Fred has learned to survive in his job by bending to the will and desires of each boss he has had. He *sees which way the wind blows* and changes his behavior accordingly.

The expression is often used in reference to a political or diplomatic situation. It has the negative connotation of being opportunistic.

SELL LIKE HOTCAKES

to sell quickly

1. When the idea of a photocopying machine first became popular, the machines *sold like hotcakes*.
2. The man who ran the snack bar hoped that the weather on the day of the parade would be hot, because then his ice cream would *sell like hotcakes*.

Compare to: *take off*

Hotcake is another word for pancake.

SELL (SOMEONE) A BILL OF GOODS [SOLD A BILL OF GOODS]

to sell someone something that is worthless (sentence 1), or to make someone believe something that is untrue (sentence 2); to deceive someone

1. The ring looked real on television, but when it arrived in the mail, Paula knew she had been *sold a bill of goods*.
2. The project manager told us that construction would be finished by August; it wasn't until later that we discovered he had *sold us a bill of goods*.

SET (SOMEONE'S) TEETH ON EDGE

to irritate

1. I wish you wouldn't talk during the movie. The noise really *sets my teeth on edge*.
2. That woman always pretends like she's giving me a compliment, but I think she's insulting me. It *sets my teeth on edge*.

Synonyms: *rub (someone) the wrong way, get (someone's) dander/hackles up, get (someone's) goat, bug*

SEVENTH HEAVEN, IN

blissfully happy

1. Cindy met Roger three weeks ago and fell madly in love with him. She's been in *seventh heaven* ever since.
2. We've been in *seventh heaven* knowing that we're going to have a baby.

Synonyms: *on cloud nine; walking on air*

SHAKE A LEG

to hurry

1. Come on, Sam, we don't have all day. Hurry up! *Shake a leg!*
2. I asked you ten minutes ago to stop playing and clean up this mess. We have to go in five minutes. You kids had better *shake a leg*.

Synonyms: *Step on it!; Get a move on!*

Antonyms: *hold (one's) horses; keep (one's) shirt on*

The expression is never used in the past tense form "shook," but it can be used in the future tense.

SHIPS PASSING IN THE NIGHT

two people whose lives come together or whose paths cross for a short time

1. Dan met the woman of his dreams, but he wasn't quite ready to get married. They dated for a while and then went their separate ways. They were *ships passing in the night*.
2. I came to this city in 1985 and left shortly after I met Robert. Our lives touched only briefly. We were *ships passing in the night*.

The expression is frequently used to describe a romance that is not meant to be because it is the wrong time or the wrong place.

SHOOT THE BREEZE

to chat or to pass time by chatting; to talk idly

1. During our lunch hour, we like to sit around and *shoot the breeze*. We talk about all kinds of things and nothing in particular.
2. I sometimes wonder if government employees ever work. They seem to sit around all day talking to each other. They always seem to be just *shooting the breeze*.

Shoot the breeze often includes the idea of chatting because one has some time to "kill" or is waiting for some amount of time to pass.

SHOT IN THE ARM

something that stimulates, boosts, or renews people's interest

1. The exciting and innovative programs introduced by the new manager were a real *shot in the arm*. Everyone became motivated to make them work.

2. The new president stimulated the citizens to take a greater interest in the welfare of the country. He was a *shot in the arm* for a nation that had become apathetic and indifferent.

The expression originates from the idea of a hypodermic injection to make a sick person feel better.

SHOT IN THE DARK

a guess, often wild or based on little information

1. Charles didn't really know the reason why his son was in a bad mood, but he guessed that perhaps he had gotten some bad grades. Charles' s guess was a *shot in the dark*.
2. I don't know what they would like for a wedding gift, but we could take a *shot in the dark* and get them something for the kitchen.

The expression suggests that the probability of a correct guess is as small as the probability of hitting something that one shoots at in the dark.

SIT TIGHT

to wait quietly and patiently, often in an anxious situation

1. The stock market was falling sharply, but Lucy didn't panic and sell her stocks. Instead she *sat tight* and waited for the market to rise again.
2. Margie called late at night to tell us that her car had broken down and to ask us to come and pick her up. We told her to *sit tight* and we would be there as soon as possible.

Synonym: *keep (one's) cool*.

The expression *sit tight* is often used in situations of danger or panic or in situations where a calm, cool head is needed. It always uses the adjective "tight" rather than the grammatically correct "tightly".

SITTING PRETTY

in a good or advantageous situation; living comfortably

1. John had managed to work his way into a position of power and influence. He was certainly *sitting pretty* until it was discovered that he was stealing money from the company and was fired.
2. I'm going to be careful how I spend and save my money now, so that when I retire I'll be *sitting pretty* and won't have to worry about my finances.

The expression is often used to describe a financially advantageous situation (sentence 2). It is always used in the present participle form. It can be used in the past or future tenses by making the verb be past (sentence 1) or future (sentence 2).

SIXTH SENSE

a feeling, intuition or premonition not based on one of the five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, or smell

1. Carrie has an uncanny sense of what's going to happen in the future. It's almost as though she has a *sixth sense*.
2. They had a terrible feeling that something bad had happened to their son. They had no rational reason for thinking it; it was just a *sixth sense*.

The expression originates from the idea that, whereas everyone is born with the five senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell, some people seem to have an additional sense that enables them to perceive events or things that others cannot.

SKELETON IN THE CLOSET {FAMILY SKELETON}

an event in one's past or family that is embarrassing and that one would prefer to keep secret

1. Before I took this job with the government, I had to reveal the fact that I had been arrested when I was a teenager. That has always been my *skeleton in the closet*.
2. Rachel's family had a relative who spent years in prison. They always tried to keep that *family skeleton* a secret.

The expression suggests something undesirable that is hidden away in the closet but that one cannot get rid of.

SLEEP LIKE A LOG/ROCK

to sleep so soundly that noise doesn't wake the person

1. Steve had to have two alarm clocks set to wake him up because one was never loud enough. He *slept like a log*.
2. As a rule, the baby never wakes up during the night. She *sleeps like a rock*, and even the noise of the TV doesn't wake her.

The expression suggests that it is as difficult to wake such a person as it would be to wake a log or a rock.

SLIP THROUGH (SOMEONE'S) FINGERS, LET (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)

to lose something because one takes too much time to consider the situation

1. They had the opportunity to make a lot of money, but they didn't act quickly enough and the chance *slipped through their fingers*.
2. When Mike asked Irene to marry him, she told him she wanted time to think it over. But she waited too long and Mike married someone else. She *let him slip through her fingers*.

Synonym: *miss the boat*

The expression suggests that the thing or person one wants to keep is slippery or hard to hold on to, like water or sand. Despite the fact that one tries to grasp it, it disappears between one's fingers.

SLOW BURN

to be quietly angry

1. Jack didn't get promoted to a new job and, although he hasn't said anything about it, I know he's doing a *slow burn*.
2. I do a *slow burn* every time my husband expects me to look after the children while he plays golf with his friends.

SLOW/QUICK OFF THE MARK

slow [or quick] to understand a situation

1. Keith never got a chance to play in the school marching band because he was *slow off the mark* and didn't sign up for it by the deadline.
2. Katherine succeeds at whatever she attempts because she's very much aware of what's going on around her. She's *quick off the mark*.

The expression suggests a race in which the participants are slow [or quick] to leave the point of departure (the mark).

SNOWBALL'S CHANCE IN HELL

no chance at all

1. Kay has a *snowball's chance in hell* of getting into that college. She has bad grades and poor exam scores.
2. They don't have a *snowball's chance in hell* of raising enough money to send him on that trip, because they don't have anything worth selling.

The expression suggests that the likelihood of something happening is as small as the probability that a snowball will not melt in the fires of hell.

SOMETHING TO CROW ABOUT

an exceptional accomplishment; an achievement that is worth bragging about

1. We're really proud of Janie. She got an outstanding score on her entrance exams. It really is *something to crow about*.
2. If you let Bill win, he'll never let us hear the end of it. You'll just be giving him *something to crow about*.

Synonym: *feather in (one's) cap*

Antonym: *nothing to write home about*

The expression suggests the sound a rooster makes to draw attention to itself.

SOUR GRAPES

a situation where a person criticizes something or someone out of jealousy

1. When Nicolas found out that he wasn't going to be promoted, he told people that he hadn't really wanted to stay with the company anyway. It was a case of *sour grapes*.
2. I know this sounds like *sour grapes*, but I'm just as glad that I didn't get into college. I think I'd rather get a job.

The expression originates from Aesop's fable about a fox that wanted some grapes from a vine but was unable to jump high enough to get them. In disgust, he claimed that they weren't worth having anyway because they were probably sour.

SOW (ONE'S) WILD OATS

to do foolish or wild things, usually as a youth

1. You would never know it, but their father was quite a troublemaker in his youth. He *sowed his wild oats* before he became a family man and an important member of the community.
2. Nancy doesn't want to settle down to a family and career until she has spent a few years traveling, having a good time, and *sowing her wild oats*.

The expression has traditionally been used to describe the behavior of a young man (sentence 1), although nowadays it can be used to describe young people of both sexes.

SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

an expression used when someone who is being talked about has just appeared

1. Jan brought up the subject of Tom at the meeting when, all of a sudden, he walked in. "*Speak of the devil!*" said Jan. "We were just talking about you."
2. "Where's Ernie?" I asked, just as Ernie came through the door. "Here I am," said Ernie. "*Speak of the devil,*" I said.

The expression has a slightly negative connotation, because of the reference to the devil, but it is usually meant humorously.

SPEAK (ONE'S) MIND

to tell someone how one feels or what one thinks

1. Donald wondered if he could *speak his mind* freely, but decided it would be best if he kept his opinions to himself. So he didn't tell her what he really thought about her.
2. I've always been honest and open with you about how I feel and what I think. I've never been shy about *speaking my mind*.

Synonym: *speak (one's) piece*

SPEAK (ONE'S) PIECE

to tell someone how one feels or what one thinks

1. Pam's father was unhappy that she intended to marry a man he didn't approve of. He wanted her to know why he disapproved of the man, so he *spoke his piece*, but he ended by saying that he would leave the decision up to her.
2. I've always been honest with you about how I feel and what I think. I've never been shy about *speaking my piece*.

Synonym: *speak (one's) mind*

The expression *speak one's piece* is usually used to describe what someone does when he disagrees strongly with someone else but has little control over the situation. The speaker wants the person to know his feelings and may present them in an uninterrupted monologue (piece).

SPILL THE BEANS

to reveal a secret

1. I told Bob not to tell anyone my secret, but he couldn't keep his mouth shut. He *spilled the beans* to the first person who walked through the door.
2. The boss was annoyed when he learned that we all knew he planned to quit. He wanted to know who had *spilled the beans*.

Synonym: *let the cat out of the bag*

Antonym: *keep (something) under (one's) hat*

SPITTING IMAGE

an exact likeness

1. Although Roger doesn't look very much like his father or mother, his grandmother says he's the *spitting image* of her late husband, Roger's grandfather.
2. The girls in that family have their mother's mouth, nose and eyes. They are the *spit and image* of their mother.

Compare to: *chip off the old block*

Spitting image refers to a physical likeness, whereas a *chip off the old block* refers to a likeness in character or personality. The expression is usually used to describe a child's resemblance to a family member.

SPLIT HAIRS

to argue about some detail that is not important

1. The girl's mother asked what time they got home and the girl told her 10:00. The brother insisted that it was 10:05. The girl told him he was *splitting hairs* and that five minutes didn't really make a difference.
2. We can't seem to agree on this minor point, but I don't think it's worth arguing about. I'm not going to *split hairs* with you about this.

The expression suggests that a hair is so thin that it would be pointless to try to split it. Similarly, it is pointless to argue over details of no consequence.

SPRING (SOMETHING) ON (SOMEONE)

to surprise someone with something

1. Grace thought she had done well on the test, so it came as a shock when she discovered that she'd failed. The teacher *sprang it on her* very suddenly.
2. You have to prepare Mark for surprises or bad news that he's not expecting. Don't *spring anything on him*.

Synonym: *knock/throw (someone) for a loop*

The expression is usually used to describe surprising someone with some unexpected news.

SPUR OF THE MOMENT, ON THE

suddenly or spontaneously; without advance planning

1. They didn't have plans for the weekend, but *on the spur of the moment*, they decided to take a trip to the beach.
2. Betsy isn't a very spontaneous person. She can't just do something *on the spur of the moment*.
3. I didn't really plan to go out last night. It was a *spur-of-the-moment* decision.

Synonym: *off the cuff*

SQUARE DEAL

a fair arrangement, fair treatment, or a fair price

1. We bought our car from the dealership in town, and they gave us a good car at a fair price. It was a *square deal*.
2. The management of this company are always out to get what they can from the workers without fair treatment or compensation. They have never given anyone a *square deal*.

Synonym: *fair and square*

In this expression, *square* means *right*.

SQUARE MEAL

full and well-balanced meal

1. That man is so thin and gaunt. He looks like he hasn't had a *square meal* in weeks.
2. The children's doctor recommends that they eat three *square meals* a day. Each meal should include a vegetable or fruit, milk or cheese, meat or some form of protein, and rice or bread.

STAND (ONE'S) GROUND

to be firm in one's resolve or not to alter one's position (sentence 1); not to give up any territory (sentence 2)

1. The union workers will not give in to the demands of the factory management. They want better wages, better health benefits and improved working conditions, and they're going to *stand their ground*.

2. When the goose was threatened by the approaching fox, she *stood her ground* and hissed and pecked at him. She would protect her baby goslings at all costs.

Antonyms: *give in; knuckle under*

Compare to: *stick to (one's) guns*

Stick to one's guns more narrowly means to be firm in one's resolve, and could be used in sentence 1 but not in sentence 2. The expression *stand one's ground* suggests having one's feet firmly planted on the ground and not giving up any ground to one's adversary. It is often used to describe the behavior of a wild animal that is being threatened by its enemy.

STAND ON (ONE'S) OWN TWO FEET

to be independent and self-supporting

1. They told their twenty-year-old son that it was time he found a job and began to support himself. It was time for him to *stand on his own two feet*.
2. I was so glad to hear that Pete and Gloria got a house of their own and that they no longer have to live with her parents. They are finally *standing on their own two feet*.

The expression suggests that when a person uses his own two feet, he is not relying on others for support. The expression always calls for two feet even when the subject is plural (sentence 2) and four feet would be more logical.

STAND OUT IN A/THE CROWD

to be distinguishable from others in a group; distinctive

1. Dianne has her own style and rarely follows current fashion. If you saw her on the street, she would *stand out in a crowd*.
2. Paul does what everyone else does and goes along with what other people think and say. He doesn't like to *stand out in the crowd*.

Compare to: *stick out like a sore thumb*

Whereas *stand out in a crowd* is usually a positive attribute, *stick out like a sore thumb* is a negative one. The expression *stand out in a crowd* suggests a degree of distinctiveness and independence.

START (SOMETHING) FROM SCRATCH

to start from the very beginning; to start from the very first step

1. The laboratory experiment failed for some unknown reason, so the chemist decided to *start the experiment from scratch*. He started over completely with new bottles of chemicals and new equipment.
2. Karen had to throw out what she had already done. She wasn't able to save any of it. She had to *start from scratch*.

Compare to: *back to square one; make (something) from scratch*

STEP ON IT

to hurry

1. Mother was late for a doctor's appointment and the children were slow getting into the car. "*Step on it!*" she snapped. "We're late."
2. As the ambulance left for the hospital with my sick father in the back, I asked the ambulance driver to *step on it*. I wanted him to waste no time getting to the hospital.

Synonyms: *shake a leg; get a move on*

Antonyms: *hold (one's) horses; keep (one's) shirt on*

The expression is often used when the speaker is annoyed or short-tempered, as in sentence 1, and probably stems from the idea of pressing down hard on the gas pedal to make a car go faster.

STEW IN (ONE'S) OWN JUICES

to suffer the consequences of one's own actions

1. The boss is annoyed that we haven't finished this report yet, but he really didn't give us enough time to do it. He's in the office pacing the floor, but I'm not going to work any faster. Let him *stew in his own juices* for a while.
2. You brought this bad situation on yourself, and no one is going to go out of his way to rescue you. You'll just have to *stew in your own juices*.

The expression suggests that one is "cooked" (stewed) in one's own unpleasant but self-made situation.

STICK-IN-THE-MUD

someone who is seen as never wanting to take part in fun activities

1. Let's go to the beach. You don't want to sit around the house all day, do you? Don't be such a *stick-in-the-mud*!
2. Everyone thought Herman was a *stick-in-the-mud* because he never liked to do anything interesting or exciting. He never took part in the tricks that the other students played on each other or on their teachers.

Compare to: *wet blanket*

The expression *stick-in-the-mud* is derogatory. It is usually said to taunt someone who is less daring, less spontaneous, or more conservative than others. It suggests the slow or sluggish movement of something stuck in mud.

STICK (ONE'S) NECK OUT

to take a risk

1. Larry helped me when no one else would, and I would do the same for him. I don't mind *sticking my neck out* for a friend like him.
2. Jack was too scared to *stick his neck out* and stand with the rest of the workers in their demands for better working conditions. He was afraid he would lose his job.

Synonym: *go out on a limb*

The expression suggests that sticking one's neck out may lead to having one's head chopped off.

STICK (ONE'S) NOSE IN

to try to find out about someone else's private business

1. Don't *stick your nose in* where it's not wanted. This matter is between Pat and me, and it has nothing to do with you.
2. I mind my own business, and don't get involved in other people's personal affairs. I don't *stick my nose in* where it doesn't belong.

Antonym: *mind (one's) own business*

The expression *stick one's nose in* has a negative connotation.

STICK OUT LIKE A SORE THUMB

not to blend in; to be obvious and prominent or easily seen

1. John said he planned to wear shorts and a sweatshirt to the wedding, but I told him it would be completely inappropriate. I told him he would *stick out like a sore thumb* and everyone would notice him.
2. The paintings of the modern artists *stuck out like a sore thumb* in the classical art museum. They just didn't belong there, grouped together with the old masters.

Compare to: *stand out in a crowd*

Whereas *stand out in a crowd* is usually a positive attribute, *stick out like a sore thumb* is a negative one. It is used to describe someone (or, less frequently, something) in a situation where one ought to blend in but doesn't.

STICK TO (ONE'S) GUNS

to be firm in one's resolve or not to alter one's position

1. Peggy was determined to ask her boss for a pay raise, but when she raised the issue, she let the boss talk her out of it. She didn't *stick to her guns*.
2. Little children often test their parents to see how much they can get away with. It's important for parents to *stick to their guns* when their children try to get something undesired out of them.

Antonyms: *give in; knuckle under*

Compare to: *stand (one's) ground*

Stand one's ground can also include the idea of being firm against one's enemy. It could be substituted in each sentence above to suggest a more adversarial relationship.

STONEWALL

to avoid answering a question directly by being deliberately vague about it, or by talking a lot but not saying anything meaningful

1. The newspaper reporter asked the president whether he intended to seek reelection. The president did not want to reveal his decision, so he *stonewalled* by talking around it.
2. The bank manager was called before the board of directors to answer questions about the large number of bad loans made by his bank. The directors asked him who had approved the loans. The manager said he wasn't sure, that the decisions were made by several people and it would be hard to determine who specifically had approved each one. The manager was *stonewalling* the board.

Compare to: *beat around the bush; hem and haw*

Hem and haw describes being at a loss for words, making only meaningless sounds, whereas *stonewall* means talking but saying little of substance. The expression is usually used to describe people that want to avoid taking responsibility or answering a direct question.

STRAIGHT AND NARROW

the path of correct social or ethical behavior that society approves of

1. Ruth never does anything surprising or slightly out of the ordinary. She follows the *straight and narrow*.
2. The boss always follows the *straight and narrow*, so we know he will treat us fairly and honestly.

Compare to: *toe the line*

STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

directly from the primary source; directly from the person or people involved

1. You may not believe this, but the boss is quitting the company. The boss told me himself. I heard it *straight from the horse's mouth*.
2. Tim asked Molly where she heard the news. He thought perhaps it was just a rumor, but Molly said she got it *straight from the horse's mouth*.

Antonym: *hear (something) through the grapevine*

The expression is used to describe the source of information, usually of a rumor or of something that is not likely to be believed. The origin of the expression is the fact that one can always tell the true age of a horse from an examination of its teeth, i.e. from its mouth. Thus, the horse's mouth is the most authoritative source of information about its age.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

people or things that one does not normally expect to find together

1. I never thought I'd see two politicians from opposite ends of the political spectrum working together to pass the same law. They certainly are *strange bedfellows*.

2. John and Charlie rarely have the same opinion about anything, so it was surprising to find them agreeing on such a controversial issue. Aren't they *strange bedfellows*?

STRAPPED FOR CASH

not having quite enough money

1. I'd love to have dinner with you, but I'm *strapped for cash* and can't afford a restaurant. Maybe we can eat at home.
2. Martha got tired of being *strapped for cash*, so she made a budget and didn't use more money than she could afford.

STRAW THAT BROKE THE CAMEL'S BACK, THE

the final thing or action which is too much or goes too far

1. Constance finally quit her job because the situation was becoming intolerable. The boss asked her to make the coffee and act as a hostess even though she was hired as an accountant. The *straw that broke the camel's back* came when the boss asked her to go out and buy his family's Christmas presents and then complained because she couldn't get her work done.
2. First the builder dropped paint on their new carpet. Then he backed his ladder through their window. They told him to get out and not come back when he backed his truck over their prized flowerbed. That was *the straw that broke the camel's back*.

Synonym: *last/final straw*

Both expressions suggest the idea of loading straw (a relatively light material) onto a camel's back until one more light straw (the last straw) breaks the camel's back.

STREET SMARTS

the knowledge one needs to live on the streets; less literally, it means knowledge of the way things work in the real world

1. Jim and George drifted from city to city, living off the streets and stealing. They managed to avoid getting caught by the police because of their *street smarts*.
2. Ms. Howard is a good businesswoman. Although she studied at Harvard Business School, she's also picked up some *street smarts* and can play hardball when she has to.

STRETCH THE TRUTH

to be truthful technically, but to distort the truth so that others are led to believe something that is not true

1. When people asked Peter if he was a manager, he *stretched the truth* by telling them that he managed the office where he worked. What he didn't tell them was that he was the only person in his office and he only managed himself.

2. Sometimes when people apply for a job, they *stretch the truth* about what they did in their previous jobs in order to make themselves seem more important or more desirable.

Compare to: *white lie*

The expression suggests that one can distort or bend the truth, so that others are misled, without actually telling a lie.

STRIKE IT RICH

to make money (sentence 1); or, less literally, to be wildly successful (sentence 2)

1. Calvin was very talented when it came to business and finance, and it was only natural that he would *strike it rich* when he invested in the stock market on Wall Street.
2. Carol was just trying to get a photograph of the actor, but she *struck it rich* when he asked her if she wanted an exclusive interview, too.

Synonym: *hit pay dirt, hit the jackpot*

The expression originated with the idea of miners discovering precious minerals, but it is also used as a metaphor to describe finding anything of value.

STRING (SOMEONE) ALONG

to make someone believe something that is not true

1. Mark had no scruples when it came to romance. He would *string some poor girl along* until he found someone he liked better. Then he would drop the first girl without a second thought and leave her broken-hearted.
2. The crook *strung the old lady along* with the story that he was investing her money in something safe, when in fact he was stealing from her.

The expression is often used to describe what a false-hearted lover does to someone who is naive or unsuspecting (sentence 1).

STUFFED SHIRT

a man who is tiresome, pompous and self-important

1. Stanley is a bit of a *stuffed shirt*. He's arrogant and pompous and he tries to make everyone else think he's so important.
2. We hate going to those business conventions. It's just a bunch of *stuffed shirts*, sitting around trying to impress each other.

Compare to: *old fuddy-duddy*

Describing someone as a *stuffed shirt* is clearly disparaging, whereas *old fuddy-duddy* describes someone who is a harmlessly and often humorously old-fashioned person. The expression *stuffed shirt* is always used to describe a man, never a woman.

SUIT/FIT (SOMEONE/SOMETHING) TO A T

perfectly; exactly

1. Margie tried on the dress in the store and looked at herself in the mirror. The dress *suit*ed her to a T.
2. The carpenter removed the old window and put in the replacement. It *fit* the space to a T.

SWALLOW (ONE'S) PRIDE

to accept something humiliating

1. My aunt is a stubborn woman. She would rather lose everything than *swallow* her pride and take money or help from us.
2. There's nothing to be ashamed of in being able to *swallow* your pride and admit when you are wrong. In fact, it's a sign of maturity.

Compare to: *eat crow*; *eat humble pie*

SWEAT BLOOD

to put out a great deal of effort; to work very, very hard

1. Gary had to work day and night to keep his large family in food and clothing. He *sweat* blood for them.
2. There's no point in *sweating* blood for some people. They'll never be happy no matter how hard you try.

The expression suggests that one works so hard that one sweats blood, a fluid more vital than perspiration.

SWEEP (SOMEONE) OFF HIS/HER FEET

to overwhelm someone, often causing him or her to fall in love

1. Marcella was an impressionable young woman with little experience of romance. Richard just *swept* her off her feet when he started to date her.
2. Judy and Joe went to Hawaii on the holiday vacation of their dreams. They were *swept off their feet* by the warm and friendly atmosphere.

Compare to: *head over heels in love*

One can be *swept off one's feet* by either a person (sentence 1) or a place or situation (sentence 2).